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ABSTRACT

This National Education Association news release looks at the financial problems of teachers, and urges application for food stamps as a means of combating rising prices and highlighting the economic plight of teachers. A number of stories are included in which teachers found it necessary to obtain food stamps in order to make ends meet. The article also includes a section on what food stamps are and who is eligible for them. (PB)

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R IMMEDIATE RELEASE

"SPECIAL FEATURE"

(Editors note: Many teachers around the country are in tight economic situations despite financial strides advanced by the National Education Association. They didn't have to wait for the latest Labor Department figures to know that the typical urban family of four requires $14,300 a year to maintain a moderate standard of living and $9,200 for an austere level, and 13 and 8 percent less respectively in non-urban areas. The average teacher salary nationwide--$11,513--falls between moderate and austere. The teachers below have applied for food stamps, as urged by NEA, to make ends meet and highlight the economic plight of teachers. They are willing to share their stories so that teachers and other persons who need food stamps will not be too proud to apply.)

Prompted by Eroded Paychecks,
Teachers Join Food Stamp-ede

WASHINGTON, D.C.--It was a winter of discontent for Hal Blaisdell.

The Kansas teacher realized he could not survive on his inflation-eroded paycheck without robbing his dwindling savings account just to meet regular monthly expenses--including food.

So he applied for food stamps at the local Social and Rehabilitation Services office. Despite having only one child and a $8,364 salary as a junior high art teacher and department head for Salina's United School District 305, the teacher had no trouble proving eligibility.

"People who need and qualify should receive food coupons," emphasizes the Vietnam veteran-turned-teacher. "There should be no stigma. Teachers are taxpayers too. I encouraged publicity on my case not just for teachers but for everyone who's been afraid to apply."

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(MORE)

Publicity created a furor in Salina and beyond--even up to the White House. Why, questionned critics, should an employed professional be eligible for a government program?

The U.S. Agriculture Department's Chicago Regional Office audited Blaisdell--highly unusual in the case of a person who just got stamps. Reports Don Anderson, executive director of Kansas UniServ District One (part of a nationwide NEA operation), "This was no ordinary audit but one requested from above. The Salina Journal headed one story on Blaisdell, 'White House Was Interested.' The word is that a disgruntled anti-teacher senator spurred the White House to call for an investigation." Government investigation merely confirmed the teacher's eligibility.

Blaisdell recalls obscene, threatening, and negative phone calls saying "that I must be a lousy teacher to do something like this. But," adds the teacher in the heart of America's farm belt, "while farmers criticized my taking advantage of a legitimate government program, I've watched them shoot their cattle, plow under their wheat, accept farm subsidies not to grow things, and receive special government loan programs.

"Here Kansas is first in the nation in teacher preparation, 13th in per capita income, but 38th in teachers' salaries. It's ridiculous," protests Blaisdell, "that I don't even make baby-sitting wages for all the children I teach. I'm making about 18 cents an hour per child."

Many people applauded Blaisdell's gutsy efforts to highlight the economic plight of teachers. And publicity prompted other financially hard-pressed people to inquire about their food stamp eligibility, making it easier for the Salina office to reach the 89 percent of eligible households that had not applied.

The art teacher collected food stamps for only two months, December and January, paying $100 monthly for $121 of stamps. He then began moonlighting as an independent insurance investigator, and his wife returned to nursing when their child Erin turned one-year-old, "although," notes Blaisdell, "we hoped that she could remain home another year during these formative years...."

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National Education Association President James A. Harris knows the importance of these formative years and of proper food and nutrition, especially for children. As a consultant to the 1970 White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health, he championed expansion of the school lunch program for needy children and other food programs.

Observes Harris, "Many government programs have been enacted for the wealthy. They enjoy tax loopholes galore. No one faults them for taking these numerous legal deductions which are not available to those with a teaching income. Teachers who need and are eligible for food stamps need not apologize to anyone for receiving legitimate benefits.

"Because food," notes Harris, "is one area that seems to be cut most in a family's budget during tight times, the NEA encourages teachers to apply for food stamps, when there is need and eligibility, as a means of keeping their heads above water in the tides of inflation." At the same time NEA has urged its 10,000 affiliates to spread the word about the federal food stamp program to others in the community, particularly senior citizens.

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Meanwhile, back in Kansas a crusader, Diane Herynk, also questions, "If these youngsters are the hope of tomorrow, what is the public saying to its teachers by not paying them a living wage? Boards are run by people who know nothing about what kids need. The real responsibilities fall on teachers. Yet we are also expected to chaperon dances and basketball games after hours and go to school summer and evenings to keep up at our own expense."

The Herynks' dreamed of being millionnaires by age 30 in their days in San Francisco. Instead, they live a simple life in a modular home in a rural area outside Topeka. They buy eggs from fellow teachers, use powdered milk, and buy sides of meat and 30 to 40 loaves of stale bread at a time to save money. James Herynk commutes 100 miles daily to teach since being fired from a closer district after flunking a board member's daughter and refusing to sell hot dogs at a basketball game.

(MORE)

The Herynks' were turned down for food stamps only because a wedding gift of mutual funds, which could not be sold without great loss, put them over the $1,500 limit on assets....

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Donald Tulisano, a sixth-year high school social studies teacher in Plainville, Conn., and father of three, never exactly envisioned himself a millionnaire. But then he didn't envision all the financial sacrifice that goes along with teaching, either.

"I realize," laments Tulisano, "that after all the college, continued schooling, financial sacrifices, and part-time work after school and summers in a warehouse frozen foods department, I still can't make it in teaching. I was fed up, stopped moonlighting to devote more time to obtaining my master's degree, and applied for food stamps last August." The $10,400 teacher qualified because of high jumps in utility bills in addition to regular fixed expenses and dependents.

Ironically, though, Tulisano says that he was unable to come up with $150 in cash monthly to buy his entitled $182 in food stamps. The Tulisanos' instead purchased half that amount each month and applied the small savings to his tuition and books....

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Across the country near the Canadian border, Michael Porter calls himself "a high paid teacher for North Dakota." At $8,400 in his sixth year, he's just shy of a master's degree. Yet the Bottineau High School teacher is often eligible for food stamps. A "part-time user," Porter is evaluated monthly and receives $150 in stamps for $130 when he does not spend many additional hours teaching adult education. Furthermore, his county welfare worker told him to "send down all the teachers to see whether they qualify."

In summer, Porter will definitely be eligible since he spends $1,500 for fulltime tuition. The master's degree will raise his salary only $100 over his current level (bachelor's degree plus 32 hours) and only $400 above those with no advanced education.

While Porter does not mind receiving stamps if he qualifies, he adds that it is degrading for a professional to have to accept government handouts in order to meet the cost of living. "It says something sad that teachers have to go on welfare," he observes, "to teach the nation's kids."

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In Arizona, another teacher also finds that food stamps are worth more than advanced study. Doug Tomlin, president of the Cottonwood-Oak Creek Education Association, notes that 15 hours of graduate study involving expenditure for tuition, books, and transportation would increase his income $307 while applying for food stamps at no extra cost at the suggestion of the NEA has just increased his income immediately by $384 yearly.

Tomlin "left the New York City rat race" in 1968 where he was an animation photographer, operated his own company, and worked for a large Madison Avenue ad agency. "But it took me until now as a teacher to equal my 1968 salary, and you know what inflation has done to that in the meantime." His salary: $9,966.

The father of three applied for food stamps after having dropped his family's medical coverage "because it came down to a choice of keeping food on the table or keeping the insurance company in business." One week, he even had to borrow money from the bank to get stamps because his food stamp authorization was up Wednesday while payday was not until the following week.

While Tomlin emphasizes his love of teaching and the importance of other values and joys over money, he at the same time urges teachers to fight collectively for professional salaries.

The association leader is finding, however, that economic life as a teacher is entirely different than his life in corporate New York 69 floors above the grime....

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In another part of Arizona, one of the many states criticized by the Food Action Center for not adequately publicizing the availability of food stamps, members of the Tucson Education Association volunteered at the Department of Economic Security to assist with the food stamp program, particularly taking applications to home-bound recipients. And locals elsewhere around the country are alerting citizens about food stamps as a community relations project, concentrating their efforts on low and middle income areas and senior citizens.

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In rural Delaware, Ohio, American history teacher and coach John Kaelber pays a relatively small amount for his food stamps--$19 for $154 in stamps. The sixth-year teacher who earns $8,200 has two large fixed expenses which are taken into account for his food stamp eligibility: full time, year-round college tuition for his wife Lorena Fay who plans to be an elementary teacher and daily baby-sitting expenses for their children, ages four and nine months.

Kaelber reports that while his teaching colleagues and the welfare office have been "great," the community--which recently defeated an education levy--has been negative. "Our yard has been toilet-papered twice, and angry comments have been received by newspapers and radio about the fact that Kevin Seckle, a fellow industrial arts teacher, and I are collecting stamps," he says.

The history teacher, who grew up on a farm there and now teaches at his alma mater, observes, "I know farmers. They are chronic complainers and cry all the way to the bank. But at the same time they get all sorts of government programs. All we did was apply for stamps and (were) found legitimately eligible under the law."

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Last winter Sherry Breschel's family lay each night before the fireplace, bundled in warm clothes and sleeping bags. Fuel had been shut off since she could not make the more than $800 in inflated winter fuel oil payments (over $300 for a two-month period) on her monthly take-home salary of $490. Neither could the divorced Richmond, Va., elementary teacher and sole support of her family of four sell the large, old, poorly insulated house since it was also in the name of her former husband, an alcoholic, who had disappeared.

Ms. Breschel received food stamps for a short period but was then declared ineligible because of joint but unsalable assets. But she planned to reapply.

"I have explained to my children that they cannot expect the same standard of living they enjoyed four years ago and we use a behavior modification point system where they get tokens for accepting responsibility as members of the family, redeemable to do things they want. Penalties are given for wastefulness. Otherwise," she explains, "we'd never be able to make it...."

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Because of the sensitivity of the food stamp issue, some teachers collecting the stamps prefer that their colleagues and others do not know. One from Kentucky who makes around $9,900 and receives $182 in food stamps for $105 because of heavy medical bills considers it both "embarrassing" and "degrading." He painfully relates, "When we were buying our week's supply of groceries, a former student was behind us in the line. When I paid with food stamps, he asked me if I had been laid off...."

The teacher continues, "Our savings have been depleted; we have to live completely on what I make. We're not financially irresponsibile. We don't own any credit cards, and we don't buy things on credit. The only thing we owe is the house payment, and I'm going to sell the house....

(MORE)

"I can't see any reason to punish my family anymore because I insist on teaching in Kentucky. In some counties in this state teachers are almost eligible for CARE packages. We don't bargain. (The Kentucky Education Association reports that the average teacher in Kentucky--36 years old with a B.A. degree and six years' experience--is probably eligible for food stamps if employed at one of the state's 80 minimum-foundation schools.) "After we sell the house, I plan to move away and start a new life somewhere else.

"I've been president of my teacher's association.... I thought of myself as a warrior, but I'm just about a defeated warrior now...."

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Another Kentucky teacher who signed his letter "Anonymous" perhaps expresses the financial plight of many teachers:

"I've been teaching 15 years. I've been receiving stamps since October 1974. My wife is not physically able to work. We have two children in high school and one in grade 3. They are eligible for reduced-price lunches. Even with this help it's impossible to make ends meet. By the time I purchase the stamps, pay utilities, insurance, mortgage, and phone bill, I don't have anything left. I have no savings of any kind.

"Would my child want to be a teacher? Not for a free college education. We've no money for recreation. I've never taken a vacation. I drive a 1962 Valiant and live in a modular home...."

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Not only elementary and secondary teachers are on food stamps. The higher education scene in recent years has witnessed salary problems and layoffs, putting well-qualified faculty walking the streets for jobs. Many of these, some education authorities suspect, have resorted to food stamps.

One of the highest paid stamp recipients is William Hunt, a teacher for 14 years and current associate professor of political science at Southwest Minnesota State College at Marshall. Hunt earns $14,900, has five children, and pays minimal child support for a sixth. Observes Hunt, "Inflation has gone far beyond what we have imagined. Being eligible for food stamps has just confirmed my belief that teachers are poorly paid."

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But if working teachers are faring poorly, what of retired teachers?

A 68-year-old teacher in Prague, Okla., spotted an article about education associations urging eligible teachers to apply for the food stamp program and for association help. She explains that she has a bad heart, high blood pressure, and has gone through seven surgeries including one for cancer. Most of her expenses must be met with the $191 monthly she receives from Social Security and teacher retirement.

The writer tried to reach this teacher, but there is no phone and has been no response to a mailgram....

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And the stories, unfortunately, go on....

June 1975

Side bar short boxed story with main story

EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT FOOD STAMPS...

BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK

Food stamps are federal government coupons. Participants buy them for a fixed amount of money--based on net monthly income after fixed expenses and family size are considered--and exchange them at grocery stores for food costing a greater amount.

Many people mistakenly believe that a person must be unemployed or on welfare to participate in the program. In fact, eligibility is determined by deducting a number of fixed expenses such as rent or mortgage, real estate taxes, medical and utility bills, medication, retirement plan contributions, and professional association dues. The number of dependents is also a factor. Eligibility thus depends on how much of your family's income is available for food. Only $1 0 or under in assets is permitted.

The supplemental income program is funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. While it is administered by a branch of the Welfare Department through county and municipal welfare offices because they have administrative facilities to handle the program, it is in no way to be confused with or compared to welfare. The average participant pays 23 percent of his net income for the food stamps.

Currently, some 18 million Americans buy food stamps to stretch their grocery dollar. Some 25 million more are eligible to apply but perhaps do not because of a combination of lack of knowledge about the program and pride. The National Education Association points out that a major reason for the low participation are states which have ignored the federal mandate to inform their constituents about the program and how it works.

Many of these eligible non-participants are teachers, particularly those on the lower rungs of the salary schedule with a family to support. Contact your local social services or welfare office to determine your eligibility.

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